

[Granite Worker]

1

Vermont 1938-9 Vermont

Mary Tomasi

63 Barre Street

Montpelier, Vermont The Granite Worker

General Information

FORM C

Text of Interview

A. Yes, my father and uncle own the granite shed. I've worked there five years, ever since I graduated from high school.

Q. Your older brother doesn't work there?

A. No, he's studying medicine. He'll be through in a couple of years. The folks wanted me to study law, but that June they needed someone in the office so I started work there, thinking I'd go to school in the fall. But that September my father decided to take a trip to Italy, and I stayed on. I've been there ever since.

Q. How did your people feel about your giving up your plans for school? Were they disappointed?

A. Yes and no. I suppose it pleases any father to know that his son is interested in carrying on his business. My mother wasn't very happy about it. You see, I don't do much office

Library of Congress

work. Most of the time I'm in the shed helping where they need me. I put my finger in at every stage of the work. That's what my mother doesn't like. She's 2 always worrying about me and my father, even with the new air purifiers we've had installed. She sends us to the doctor every four or five months for physical examinations.

Q. Has anyone near to you, I mean a relative, had this stonecutters' tuberculosis?

A. Just an uncle. He was at the Pittsford Sanatorium for 7 months. They said there was no help for him, so he came back to Barre, to the 'San' on the hill. He said if he had only a few months to live he'd rather be near his family.

Q. How long has he been sick?

A. We don't know for sure. It's been only a year since he's stopped working, but I think he must have known it before. He went right on working as long as he could. He bought the house they're living in a few years ago, and I believe he wanted to work until he finished paying for it.

Q. Wasn't that a little foolish? Wouldn't he have had a better chance to live if he had rested and taken it easy?

A. He might have lived a little longer, but I don't think any of them like to drag out a useless life. They're pretty well resigned to their fate. These stonecutters expect that one day sooner or later they will get it. They're like my uncle; they'll work as hard and as long as they can to leave their families secure.

Q. Does the thought of consumption prey on their minds? Are they morbid about it? A. To all outward appearances - no. They're, well, they're sort of proud of their work. They feel proud to be taking an active part in the biggest granite center in the world. Some of them have never seen granite from other states, but they'll down it every time.....

Library of Congress

Q. You said, "to all outward appearances" they don't worry, you mean they are concealing their true feelings?

A. Well, yes. The big worry of some of them is that they'll die before they have made good provision for their families. That's the real reason behind the strikes. They feel that since they're 'marked' men with perhaps less time to provide for their families than the average man, that they are entitled to higher wages. Besides there are certain periods in the year - we call them slack time and dead time - when there is little work to be done. Sometimes only a few men work during these slow weeks; sometimes, none at all. If the slack time lasts under three weeks they draw no salary at all; if more, they can apply after the third week for unemployment compensation (Federal). It's just enough to tide them over.

Q. There's the expense of medical care, too, when they're sick...

A. Yes. If they finally contract T. B., they are usually sick over a long period, months, sometimes years. And even though their salary has stopped coming in, they have to have medicines and extra comforts. Of course, there's a voluntary insurance they can profit by, which pays them small dividends for the duration of their sickness regardless of its nature or where it was contracted. The worker pays a dollar a week while he works, and his employer pays a dollar and a half. While the worker is sick and is drawing on this insurance, the employer continues paying his share, that is - the dollar and a half.

Q. Is it true that the workers seldom mention this stonecutters' consumption amongst themselves?

A. Yes, it's true. They seem to shy away from talk of it. When they work, they work hard, and they're happy at it. Occasionally they'll crack jokes. I don't think I've ever heard anyone laugh as hard and as heartily as these men. You can hear them above the buzzing and droning of the machinery, and that machinery certainly makes a lot of noise.

Library of Congress

Q. I've seen them pour out of the sheds and hustle into their cars, when the whistles blow around four.* They certainly seen a merry, noisy crowd. A great many of them own cars, don't they?

A. Majority of them. If you followed those cars you'd notice that most of the younger fellows stop in the local beer gardens for a couple of beers before going home. A few of the older ones do, too, but a great many of them still prefer to go straight home to their sour wine.

* A stonecutter's standard work day is eight hours long. The employers at the various sheds arrange these work hours to suit themselves and the [employees?]. 5 Q. They don't make as much wine now as they used to; do they?

A. No. Not even a third as much. During prohibition a small group of Italians who wanted to make wine would get together and order a carload of grapes from California. Sometimes just one or two would buy a load; and I've seen them, when the grapes arrived and there was a surplus,- go through town asking individuals if they wanted to buy a bushel or two. It was profitable to make wine then. Canadian beer was selling high, around a dollar a bottle. These Italians would make the wine, keep a barrel or two for their own use, and the rest they would sell at a good profit. I've seen them sell it by the half-barrel, but there's much more profit in selling it at their own houses by the glass or bottle.

Q. Weren't these people afraid of being raided for selling liquor?

A. Well, yes. Some of the places were raided, but they'd start selling again later. Many of the houses where wine was and still is sold, aren't on the main and prominent streets. That helps a lot..... They don't waste any part of the grapes, either. After the juice is pressed from them, they cook the mash and distill grappa from it. I've seen them make it in a homemade still; it is a vaporizing and condensing process. They use a copper washboiler. Most of these Italians prefer grappa to any other hard liquor.